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Confronting gendered constructions of refugee deservingness and representations: Syrian refugee women strategising for humanitarian aid in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
This study shows how Syrian refugee women living in Ankara cope with their systematically enforced dependency on humanitarian aid through individual and collective agency as they negotiate their inclusion into categories of deservingness and attempt to maintain this inclusion. We argue that the gendered discourses used to delineate deservingness categories in the humanitarian field clash heavily with the portrayal of Syrian refugees in Turkish public discourse. Our qualitative data demonstrate how notions in the humanitarian field about women’s role in the family as nurturing homemakers, assumptions about their innate docility as vulnerable refugees and the contrasting portrayals in Turkish society of Syrian refugee women as sexualised threats to the Turkish family shape their agentive negotiations and subsequently lead to multiple tensions. We also highlight how the centrality of gender in the discursive framing of refugees in Turkey produces the idealised refugee in the figure of the widowed refugee mother. By problematising how refugee women’s agency play out, we intervene in the discussion about the gendered terrains of refugeehood and provide empirical weight for the exploration of the paradoxes in the humanitarian field that refugee women struggle to resolve.

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Introduction

The word is musa’adat ensaneyeh (humanitarian aid). The word musa’adat means to provide help, isn’t it? To make it easy for people who need it. I have not felt eased since coming here. Sometimes, the word feels like it describes how helpless I am […] without karama (dignity). I convince myself … that it means helping, but […] I feel forced to seek it, and people must be begged to give it to me.

Ghadha’s comment reflects the desperation and resentment of many Syrian refugee women and their attempts at optimism so that they can handle the various pressures that crop up in their new lives in Ankara. As Turkey still applies a geographical limitation to its implementation of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, many who fled war experience refugeehood under ‘temporary protection’, which means that they are accorded significantly weakened protection under the Temporary
Protection Regulation (TPR) which was added to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2014. Both LFIP and the TRP establish the rights of refugee women to protection depending on their role as a ‘mother’ or ‘wife’ or whether they are vulnerable due to ‘pregnancy’, ‘alone with a child’, or being a ‘victim of physical or sexual violence’ (Kivilcim 2016, 200).

Legislative framings undergirded by gendered notions reinforce the vulnerabilities of refugees in Turkey, which is deepened through the gendered interplay that occurs in the humanitarian field — one of the most defining features of a Syrian woman’s life as a refugee in Turkey. We begin with the premise that temporariness in Turkish refugee management creates the condition for refugee families to become dependent on aid. Against a backdrop lacking a dependable system providing statutory services (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2021; Coşkun and Uçar 2018), one of the critical policies that forces aid dependency is the curtailment of employment for refugees. A 2016 regulation on work permits, lauded as a pathway to formal employment, is nullified in practice due to its uncompromising nature; employers must apply on behalf of the refugee worker, prove that no qualified Turkish citizen was available for employment, adhere to a 10% limit on foreigners in the company, pay an application fee of 378.70 lira (as of 2021) and pay social insurance (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2021; Üstübici, Kirişçioglu, and Elçi 2021). While this drives Syrian men into the informal economy at severe risk (Üstübici and Karadağ 2020), where they are severely underpaid (Caro 2020), the effect on Syrian women is direr with only 15% of working-age Syrian women employed, usually in domestic work (Turkish Red Crescent 2021).

With employment an impossibility for most refugees, families are dependent on financial support from the cash transfer programme extending them the Kızılaykart (debit card) implemented by Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent) and financed by the European Union. Despite being a consistent source of financial support, 79% of households benefitting from cash transfers continue to struggle with food insecurity (Turkish Red Crescent 2022). Furthermore, registration requirements, such as an official residential address, impede universal provision as refugee families continue to suffer from shelter insecurity. In many cases, they may be unable to comply since many rely on cheap informal housing lacking legal status (Cetinoglu and Yilmaz 2021).

Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel (2021) referred to the interlocking vulnerabilities experienced under temporary protection as ‘an architecture of precarity’. Within this architecture, where the enormous task of surviving poverty and marginalisation falls largely on the shoulders of refugees, humanitarian aid organisations emerge as a crucial source of support, often providing relief aid to address the lack of food and shelter security. We argue that aid organisations are structurally embedded actors whose gendered enactments make women the focus of aid provision, turning them into the primary agents through which the dependency on aid is perpetuated, thereby contributing to the gendered inequalities they experience during refugeehood. This article focuses on how Syrian refugee women tailor their aid-seeking practices in a humanitarian context replete with gendered tropes interacting with societal constructions about refugees. In doing so, we seek to expose the paradoxes in constructing the deservingness categories and the tensions it generates for refugee women. Since the consequences that emerge due to macro-scale structures play out at the micro-scale, it is in the interpersonal and intersubjective processes occurring in the humanitarian field that we trace the gendered
impacts of the temporary protection regime where women encounter the templates of deservingness exerting undue influence on their lives.

In the following section, we work through the academic literature problematising the production of hierarchies of vulnerabilities to produce categories of deservingness in the humanitarian field. This is accompanied by closer attention paid to the construction of refugees in the Turkish context. We proceed by detailing our methodology in section three. The fourth section begins our empirical presentation, where we argue that aid-seeking is a gendered practice. Sections five and six continue on our empirical data, with section five highlighting the strategies that refugee women adopt as a response to gendered enactments and section six underlining the tensions that emerge when refugee women are caught between gendered constructions of deservingness versus un-deservingness shaping their experiences of refugeehood. We conclude by highlighting how the centrality of gender in the discursive framing of refugees in the humanitarian field and the contradictory constructions of refugees in the local sphere impacts humanitarian aid distribution and brings new challenges to refugee women.

**Constructions of refugeehood, categorising deserving refugees**

This section situates our analysis of gendered humanitarian interactions within the recent academic literature that underlines the construction of refugee vulnerability and the production of categories of deservingness. As our focus is on understanding the framing of refugee deservingness through gendered templates – which we suggest permeates both institutional frameworks and shapes interactions at the interpersonal level – we foreground the literature analysing displacement as profoundly shaped by intersectional identities (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Ticktin 2011) as humanitarian enactments internalise practices of inclusion and exclusion within coercive care dynamics (Pallister-Wilkins 2020).

Scholars have made a number of important critiques linking the construction of vulnerability and subsequent production of deservingness in humanitarianism to social constructs that are gendered, racialised and ageist (Allsopp 2017; Lupieri 2022; Papada 2021). A line of thought woven into this academic work alludes to the ‘institutional fractioning’ of the label ‘refugee’ as cautioned by Zetter (2007), which the entwinement of the humanitarian care and migration control mechanisms are contributing to (Pallister-Wilkins 2020). Humanitarian care is increasingly underpinned by discourses justifying a hierarchical construction of deservingness that ‘essentialise notions of vulnerability, victimhood and dependency’ (Palillo 2022, 322), leading to the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others (Lupieri 2022; Sözer 2019) and exposing refugees to different forms of control (Malakasis and Sahraoui 2020; Ticktin 2011).

In tandem with this literature, we seek to complicate humanitarian practices, especially at the ground level and in urban sites, which are an arena for constructing, contesting and negotiating the deservingness tropes. By linking literature that discusses the ingrained representations in humanitarian mechanisms of the vulnerability of refugee women to the literature about the salient construction of women’s role in the family – both of which we argue are embedded in the ‘logic of protection and exclusion’ (Papada 2021) that unfolds in the Turkish case – we explore the strategies that refugee
women deploy as a response to the gendered nature of the humanitarian field and the construction of the most deserving refugee that it yields: widowed refugee mothers.

**Representations of refugee women: vulnerable; homemakers and caregivers in the family**

Scholars have addressed the de-politicised and de-historicised representations of refugees, drawing particular attention to how it shapes an understanding of refugee women (Barnett 2011; Darling 2016; Malkki 1996). The predominant image of the refugee as a lone racialised woman surrounded by her children (Johnson 2011) taps into our broad understanding of the family and the role of women in it and triggers concerns about ‘women and children’ (Enloe 1993). Rigid gender divisions adopted throughout the world require husbands and fathers to provide financial support through wage-income-earning while women, as wives and mothers, maintain the household and care for children. Notions of motherhood as the natural state of women and nurturing as something innately feminine generate an unquestioned expectation about the woman’s physical location in the domestic sphere (Parr 2019). This male breadwinner/female homemaker family arrangement has strong normative and prescriptive power and is deeply entrenched in the humanitarian field where aid organisations ascribe their aid provisions as of interest solely to the refugee women (Hyndman 2000).

This stands in contrast to the treatment of refugee men, with Allsopp (2017) problematising their portrayal as ‘militarised’, with their fatherhood under suspicion and even as young men, with their youth cast as a threat. As Palillo (2022, 331) rightly recognised, ‘refugee men are [placed] at the bottom of any hierarchy of deservingness’ in the humanitarian field. Women with socio-economic subservience, greater responsibility to provide domestic labour and conforming to their gender role as homemakers are perceived as non-threatening and, therefore, more deserving (Hyndman and Giles 2011).

This is all the more so since refugee women occupy a ‘feminised subject position’ (Turner 2019, 597), coded as subservient and resilient, allowing humanitarian organisations to build their fundraising around them, whereas men—even in their displacement and refugeehood—are envisioned as power holders. When humanitarian fundraising becomes an overriding purpose, organisations rationalise the preponderance of refugee women in the humanitarian field (Rajaram 2002) and produce simplistic representations of women as nothing more than passive conduits for aid (Baines 2017). By hyper-focusing on refugee women, a new form of gender bias emerges in refugee protection regimes and the humanitarian field (Freedman 2010; Hyndman and De Alwis 2004), generating a hierarchy with aid workers having the authority to speak on behalf of the refugee women (Hyndman 2000).

With this authority, aid agents reinforce the conditions of dependency as refugee families increasingly turn to them for alternative ways of survival when dysfunctional service provisions fail them. For refugee men and women, the humanitarian field becomes an arena within which they express their gender as they cope with a new gender dynamic where women are at the forefront in delivering aid and men are often ignored, if not outright suspected, as partners (Olivius 2016). Much as traditional gender division has ‘female dependency inscribed into the model’ (Lewis 2001, 135), refugee contexts also have female dependency inscribed into it, but this time on the
aid provision system. This female dependency does not seem problematic within a framework of women seen as deserving due to their coded vulnerability, passiveness and docility.

**Portrayals of Syrian refugees in Turkey**

Such gendered templates embedded in discourses about refugees are also rooted in the sociocultural context and mediated, as Sahraoui (2020, 171) argues, ‘inter-subjectively and relationally’. Here we turn to the construction of Syrian refugee men and women in Turkish public discourse and the mainstream media to unravel the ideas shaping their construction in the humanitarian field, which contributes to such inter-subjective and relational processes. Representation of Syrian refugee men and women in Turkey broadly mirrors the dichotomised understanding elsewhere, with women cast as vulnerable, men as threatening and Syrian refugees as a whole seen as a burden (Efe 2019; Narlı, Özaşçılar, and Tukan-Ipek 2020). However, writing specifically about Syrian women in Turkey, Yamaner (2021) demonstrates the gendered racialisation they are subject to, drawing attention to the Turkish preoccupation with Syrian women’s (veiled) appearances, high-maintenance grooming habits, their fertility rates and presumptions about their feminine subservience all of which are deemed desirable to Turkish grooms, costing Turkish brides and threatening the Turkish family.

Ascription of unattached Syrian women with templates of ‘homewrecker’ and ‘seductress’ where they are presumed to deliberately target Turkish men through easy acquiescence to unregistered marriages or polygamy obscures the gendered vulnerabilities they face (Narlı, Özaşçılar, and Tukan-Ipek 2020). Moral outrage about unregistered and polygamous marriages does not consider that Syrian refugee families struggle to obtain legal documents necessary for a registered marriage, nor does it take into account their material existence where their state of uprootedness has demolished economic prospects and familial networks (Suerbaum 2020). Marriages are a coping mechanism for refugee women (Aksu Kargın 2018). Pinpointing the fluidity of the gender experiences of Syrian brides and Turkish grooms in intermarriages, often met with societal derision, Akyuz and Tursun (2019) suggest that such marriages allow refugee women to cast off a refugee identity and seek the autonomy robbed from them through displacement.

Humanitarian efforts enmeshed in the care/control dynamic are not immune to the gendered constructions that surround it, paving the way for the reproduction of power differentials even as it produces hierarchies of vulnerabilities where there is a shift from concerns for the ‘vulnerability of all refugees to the vulnerability of only some’ (Sözer 2019, 2776). Refugee women must negotiate their inclusion into categories of deservingness that contour around such gendered notions of vulnerabilities and — upon inclusion — maintain it.

**Widowed refugee mothers as the most deserving refugee**

In discussing vulnerabilities attending widows in general, the UN highlighted how they were at ‘risk of multi-dimensional poverty, loneliness and isolation’ (UN Women 2019). Emphasis on the importance of empowering the increasing number of widows and
female-headed households demonstrates their firm establishment on the UN radar (UNHCR 2020). The protracted refugee crises straining the humanitarian machinery pushes local aid organisations to internalise patterns of globally institutionalised concerns about the genuine vulnerabilities of refugee widows and single mothers and use it as shorthand to prioritise them as a particular category of concern at the local level. Concerns about single mothers quickly turn into entrenched norms at all levels because of the ubiquity of the idea that a woman alone is vulnerable.

In the Turkish context, widowed mothers are further accorded a special position due to the place of şehit (martyrs) in Islamic understanding and the meaning bestowed upon the women who had a relationship with the martyr. The Prophetic practice of marriage with widows of martyred Muslim soldiers cements the status of war widows (Hatina and Litvak 2016), who becomes the focal point in the cultural understanding of Islamic duty due to the martyred man (Cook 2007). Discourses about refugee widowhood are also context-dependent, and understanding how it produces the hierarchical relationship of victim and saviour requires us to look into the Turkish context, where meaning is attached to the duty of the man to sacrifice in defence of his country with his death viewed as a sacrosanct expression of patriotism. Ideas about widows of martyred men feed off notions about the patriotic duty revered in Turkish society, turning it into a status that is insulated from the scorn levied against the refugee men who survived displacement (Sözer 2019). Widowed women are ideal refugees because they are partners of idealised masculinity.

While not all widowed women from Syria become widows due to martyrdom, the idea of şehit families evokes an uncontested duty of care, compounded by Islamic notions of protecting yetim (orphans). Understood not only as the duty of other Muslims but also the duty of the widowed mother, Ozkaleli (2021) discussed how widowed refugee mothers in Turkey understood their elevated duties as ‘pious mothering’ due to the construction of widowhood as a state tying them to their orphaned children. Thus, widowed refugee mothers are constructed in relation to the martyrdom of their husbands or their orphaned children, both of which afford them a privileged position in the Turkish humanitarian imaginary.

Research methods

This article draws on the data collected from 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with refugees and aid workers (16 refugee women, one refugee man, four female and one male aid worker). This was complemented by participant observation in the field to capture the everyday practices of humanitarian aid assistance which occurred in aid distribution centres of two foundations located in the Altındağ district in Ankara and two refugee support centres located outside of Altındağ. Subsequent visits to the aid distribution centres allowed us to interview the aid workers.

Preliminary data exposed the inclination within the humanitarian field to favour single mothers who were widowed or divorced, leading us to make widowed women the majority in our study. We sought to prioritise the condition of such women within a coercive gender hierarchy and applied feminist methodologies (Spencer, Pryce, and Walsh 2014) to capture the multiplicities, complexities and ambiguities in their relationship to the humanitarian field. To ensure confidentiality, we did not
openly confirm which participants we would contact from the list we compiled through the snowballing method and instead, with a focus on diversity, reached out to them individually. The participants were from four neighbourhoods of Altındağ, a slum district attracting refugee families with affordable albeit insecure housing and job opportunities in the furniture manufacturing sector (Erman 2017).

A long friendship between the first author and many of the refugee women through private humanitarian work allowed the interviewing to be intimate. Multiple social visits before the interviews ensured that they would feel at ease during interview sessions which took place at their homes. The formal interviews lasted three to four hours; some extended into informal conversations through lunches and teas and lasted longer. Keeping in mind the predominant domestic duty of childcare, we brought educational materials, food, and toys for the children, requested their presence elsewhere and paused interviewing whenever mothers had to attend to them. When the conversation was light-hearted, and children were in the vicinity, we interacted with them to distract them, breaking formality and making the process dynamic and flexible.

Participants were informed of the aim of the study and assured of its voluntary nature and conditions of confidentiality. Due to the public sensitivity surrounding the topic of refugee protection in Turkey, all participants felt safer by providing verbal consent only. Audio recordings were taken only after explicit permission. The interviews were conducted with a non-Syrian Arabic-to-English interpreter recruited based on previous interactions between her and the first author on the field, which lent to fluid communication between the researcher and the interpreter, further enhanced by her work in aid projects carried out by humanitarian organisations. The themes from interview transcripts and field notes were identified using iterative data analysis (Saldaña 2015).

Seeking humanitarian aid as a gendered practice in Ankara

This section focuses on how refugee women interact with aid workers and male relatives as they seek aid, exposing the gendered nature of the humanitarian relationships in the field. Our findings show that the rejection of refugee men in the humanitarian field prompts their withdrawal, leaving it a feminised space where women are responsibilised for the pursuit of aid in a process that involves active appealing, negotiating and contesting.

Aid organisations marginalising refugee men

Humanitarian enactment takes for granted that refugee men would thrive without ‘humanitarian care’ (Turner 2019, 611), particularly in the job market, illustrated by this blunt statement of an aid worker: ‘When a man comes in, I get disturbed. Go get employed. What is their [the man’s] business at an aid organisation?’. Assumptions about their laziness and notions that they are devoid of any sense of domestic responsibility to their households lead to the presumption that they need to be propelled into the breadwinner role. Such expectations ignore the actual reality of employment with the male refugee participant noting that the sporadically available work was usually labour-intensive and informal, exposing him to inconsistent payment and bodily harm. Refugee families are aware of the expectation that self-reliant men should
support them. Interviews with refugee women provide insight into how these notions are reinforced through practice. They reported instances where support for refugee families is withdrawn simply at the sight of a man interacting with the family, irrespective of relationships. One refugee woman narrated how aid workers who visited her to assess her level of vulnerability promptly rescinded their financial assistance after noticing a working-age nephew visiting her during their visit.

Aid organisations also do not look beyond the man’s presence in the family to ascertain if the man is employable. A refugee mother claimed she had never received consistent aid from aid organisations as she had a husband and a son of working age. Suggesting that aid organisations are not sensitive to the widely reported mental health deterioration among refugees, she revealed that both the father and the son were diagnosed with schizophrenia. Another refugee woman remarked that the aid provision process fails even though her husband was visibly disabled: ‘They asked me about my husband, and I told them he was in a wheelchair and could not work. They offered to visit us, but we are still waiting’. Powerfully animated by the idea of Syrian men as irresponsible, lazy and seeking hand-outs, such instances invalidate disabilities and entrench the notion that the men are failing as providers.

**Men holding onto masculine pride, women rationalising their responsibilisation for seeking aid**

When the gendered division of work and care is disrupted, refugee men become frustrated at being barred from expressing their gender through their role as providers, a complex experience also discussed by Suerbaum (2020) about Syrian refugee men in the Egyptian context. In our study, we found that men are agonised by their alienation from the humanitarian field: ‘Whenever I go to any organisation, I feel like I am facing an army. When you ask them what kind of aid they provide, you can feel their eyes on you, making you feel weak’. The hostility to refugee men in aid distribution centres is viscerally felt and experienced as violence. Such strong sentiments from people displaced due to violent conflict demonstrate the continuation of violence to their sense of dignity, if not their very person.

Humiliated by the treatment and their sense of inadequacy, men retreat from the humanitarian field in a move that relieves them of their duties. The participant continued, ‘I cannot prevent my wife from going, but I have decided that I will never go to a distribution centre and ask them for help’. By withdrawing, he maintains his masculine pride, challenged by aid workers who dismiss him. However, in responsibilising his wife with seeking aid, he essentially conforms to the notion that the distribution centres are a place for women only.

Refugee women also rationalise the absolution of refugee men. A mother defended her husband’s refusal to accompany her inside aid distribution centres, portraying him as a strong family provider before the war and pointing out that Turkey had turned him timid. Responding to the construction of the humanitarian field as a woman’s domain, refugee women deploy gendered expectations to rationalise themselves as better equipped in humanitarian encounters: ‘They[men] are not patient like us. I can stay calm; even if someone screams at me, I will tolerate it … but my husband will get into a fight … ’ Such statements effectively normalise an environment of abuse and highlight
how passivity presumed to be an inherently feminine trait, is necessary for their resilience.

Refugee women strategising in response to humanitarian practices

Refugee women, when pushed to the forefront of seeking aid, devise strategies that can either be a challenge to or co-option of gendered tropes, demonstrating how agency is embedded in interrelated societal structures. In this section, we explore their strategies to reach the place of aid, strategies in the place of aid distribution, and strategies as everyday practices to maintain their inclusion in deservingness categories, leading us to explore their struggles to cope with the contradictions that crop up as they attempt to align with the gendered templates of the ‘deserving’ refugee.

Strategies to reach the place of aid distribution: planning meticulously, coping with sexualised stigmatisation

Refugee women reported aid seeking as mentally and physically demanding – akin to project management, it required meticulous planning and coordination of actions as they juggled arrangements with multiple sources of aid to supplement the monthly cash from the Kızılaykart to see them through the months. In addition to juggling the myriad tasks of collecting information through networking, they have to plan the process of going out of their neighbourhood and navigating public spaces to reach aid distribution centres, usually located in far-off neighbourhoods, a task they tackle by grouping together and splitting taxi fares. In deliberately banding together, refugee women display their pragmatism by saving money, appeasing their need for safety and in the distribution centre, drawing courage when they face aid agents.

It also hints at the gender constraints they have to navigate, exemplified in the account of a widow whose husband died of a sudden stroke.

One of my [Turkish] neighbours… he is always drunk and swearing at us … he takes his anger out on refugees… I am afraid of the attention he will bring to me… even with my children accompanying me… now that I am a widow, things are different. Just yesterday, my Syrian neighbour, who lives in the apartment below… He stood on the road and spoke directly to me, where everyone could see us talk. I refused to reply and later told his wife that he was provoking now that I am a widow … he thinks he can do it, but he knows that this is not acceptable in our community.

Presenting her new state of widowhood as one attracting unwanted attention, she finds herself fearful of a double attack from both within her community and outside. Although she grapples with the lack of control over how she is publicly received, navigating the public arena is now incumbent on her because she has to provide for her orphaned family. A refugee woman’s solitary excursion in Altındağ is virtually unseen and unheard of, whether there is no fare, the distance is short, or the destination familiar. The women in our study vocalised fears of potential threats to their reputation; this concern exacerabtes in households with men where the patriarchal power distribution prompts husbands, sons and brothers to police them (Kutlu 2020). A necessary caveat here is that refugee masculinities should be understood with reference to how refugee-hood shapes the retaliatory power of men.
Aside from adhering to the gendered codes of moral behaviour that would meet the expectations of the Syrian and Turkish communities, refugee women also have to be conscious of behaviour that might marginalise them in the humanitarian field. Well aware of their constructions as a threat to the Turkish families and the notions attached to their ways of life, one participant spoke of the prying nosiness of the aid workers who ask about her visitors and frequent comments about the number of children she has. On the other hand, the women also strategically choose to bring their children with them as a response to the long-existing tropes of ‘women and children’ (Enloe 1993) in the humanitarian field, hoping the presence of children could elicit the sympathy of aid workers.

**Strategies in the place of aid distribution: narrating victimhood, proving vulnerability; engaging with intimate encounters**

The lack of a procedural approach to seeking aid means that proving vulnerability through the narration of victimhood emerges as a gendered practice in response to the trope of deservingness. A ‘politics of pity’ invoked to access aid (Wagner 2018) lends to the power hierarchy that emerges as refugee women express themselves in a ‘plaintive and helpless manner’ while ‘humanitarian experts voice authority and solutions’ (Rajaram 2002, 261). Participants in this study also commented on how they appeal by expressing their desperation. ‘They can see it in my eyes and my face, how desperate I am’, a woman explained, ‘men cannot show themselves to be that desperate’. Appeals from women are evaluated positively since aid organisations presuppose victimhood and vulnerability as suitable traits of refugee women. Although men also experience the same desperation, it is perceived as out of their character to express it.

Refugee women often face internal struggles about the morality of their performance as they attempt to fit into the templates of deservingness. A participant discussing how she engages with the aid agent highlighted her unease when her words do not match her exact reality. ‘I say I have no money, which might be ayip (shameful) because I actually do have a 10 lira note or a 20 [opens her wallet to show]. So yes, perhaps it is ayip to say I have nothing but…’, she trails off, unable to precisely express the dissonance she feels at using exaggerated language for a purposeful performance. Such instances of reflection on their engagement with aid workers indicate that refugee women know how much their self-advocation relies on performance.

In the field, encounters with male aid workers are particularly charged instances where there is scope for interactions to lead to sexual transactions (something the participants claimed to know of but never participated in). One participant described: ‘If you laugh in a specific tone … and speak of things you need with a certain delicacy … you can just use your voice … or your eyes … then you might get guaranteed access to aid’. Since aid distribution centres often base their work on notions of hayır (faith-inspired charity), women must balance Muslim decorum with the necessity to win favour. Most veiled Syrian women utilise their bodies as interfaces to express their sexuality in ways that can seem understated to some. Explicit expressions of sexual interest are discarded in favour of something implicit. Their strategies to win favour might not always lead directly to intimate relations with men. Subtle implications of the possibility of
something intimate can also sometimes be enough. By delicately testing the boundaries of what is allowed and forbidden, refugee women maintain continued access to aid assistance from month to month.

Relationships of various intimacies between refugee women and male aid workers present a dilemma for most refugee women and stand in contrast to the preoccupation of refugee women to protect their image on their way to distribution centres. Although they acknowledge the dangers posed by male aid workers, they also recognise the agency of the women in such positions. ‘Some women are making use of their situation with aid workers, and the aid workers are also making use of the situation’, one participant shrugged. Another presented contradictory feelings:

I have no respect for such women, but sometimes it is not their fault. Maybe we can say that women … have to use their beauty. They know it will work. They can do this as much as they want … but [they should know] that this life will end.

Such sentiments expose the anxieties surrounding the courses of action available for refugee women forced into relations of dependency on aid. Given the ambivalence surrounding refugee women and the immense power disparity, such strategies of engaging in intimate encounters should still be viewed as exploitation, especially as it occurs in humanitarian contexts. Many women have to toe a delicate line to prevent their ostracising from their community and violence from their host community, particularly in an environment where the rise of marriage between Syrian women and Turkish men has been the subject of public discourse (Narlı, Özşçılars, and Tukan-Ipek 2020). Aid workers are part of this discourse, with the male aid worker stating that Syrian women openly flirt and a female aid worker making veiled inferences about Syrian women as less conservative than expected. These statements tap into assumptions amongst faith-based organisations about the morality of those who deserve to be aided.

**Strategies to maintain deservingness: rendering their men invisible**

The marginalisation of refugee men in the humanitarian field pushes refugee women, whether married, widowed or divorced, to render the men in their lives invisible as they respond to the ‘categorical fetishism’ (Crawley and Skleparis 2018 cited in Lupieri 2022) of widowhood. A participant who remarried in Turkey after losing her husband in Syria expressed regret about remarrying because of the reduction in aid assistance and shared her frequent thoughts about using her dead husband’s death certificate to access aid. Others pretend to be widows by discarding their husbands’ IDs in the list of members of the household. Refugee women can also go further in their performance of widowhood, arranging for the men to be absent during house visits by aid agents. ‘Sometimes the husbands know and agree, but other times the husbands do not know. She tells him to leave the house with the excuse that female relatives or friends will visit’, revealed a participant. Even while discussing the immorality of such strategies, they reasoned it as inevitable because, as they reported, even private donors were usually interested in assisting widowed women and orphans, often providing aid and organising field trips and picnics for the children, a fact corroborated by aid workers.
Tensions shaping female refugeehood in everyday life

The empirical data presented above gives us a clearer picture of how gendered humanitarian practices based on gendered templates, reshaped in the local aid field, produce a gendered refugeehood. With challenges to who they are and how they arrange their family relations and domestic partnership due to the demands to fit into the role of the deserving refugee, women have to grapple with tensions in their everyday lives that are hard to reconcile.

Tension between seeking employment and seeking humanitarian aid and between providing and homemaking

Refugee women often pursue aid over employment, even though it is evident that power discrepancies and stigmatisation are similarly reproduced in the humanitarian field. Explaining such decisions are the demands of informal jobs for refugee women – poorly paid, unprotected and insecure. A refugee woman who worked at a glove manufacturing factory spoke about how they were held against their will to meet daily quotas and how the working environment impaired her posture and eyesight and induced an asthma attack. Her family faces multiple vulnerabilities consisting of a husband who was disabled due to conflict and two young children, making her the only member who could provide for the family. Yet they fall in between the cracks of the protection system, drawing the woman into competition for aid.

Despite such forays into work, the labour and aspiration for employment are dismissed in the one-dimensional understandings of aid workers, one of whom commented that Syrian women refused employment because they were ‘obsessed with mothering their children at home’. Gender emerges in how aid workers pass off comments on the parenting of the refugee mothers, pathologising their inability to find employment, echoing the arguments by Sahraoui (2020) about the inclination within humanitarian care to pass judgement on the intimate functioning of the family.

Participants defied assumptions about their lack of interest in employment and openly discussed their aspirations for jobs they enjoyed, acknowledging the presumptions about their lack of affinity for employment and widespread notions of laziness. One spoke longingly of when she was designing and sewing clothing for brides in her hometown. Another woman invited us to view the Avon cosmetics collection she was selling. ‘It is not to make money’, she confided, ‘I just want to show that I have interests other than being a wife and mother’. The male refugee participant spoke vehemently against the idea of all refugees receiving benefits: ‘If we all depend on aid, it will make us lazy’. Some-what internalising but also pushing back against the rhetoric of Syrians as lazy, he proposes aid as the factor contributing to laziness. ‘What we need is employment’, he expressed earnestly. Such aspirations are the basis upon which advocacy organisations organise entrepreneurship workshops. Nevertheless, ‘entrepreneurial’ activities do not translate into real job opportunities.

Contradictory impulses from the aid agents who direct aid for refugee women but also criticise them for depending on aid produce anxieties for the women, who are adamant that aid-seeking proves more advantageous because it allows them more leeway regarding their domestic duties, which does not abate. ‘Of course, aid seeking is better … in the
end, you gain almost nothing [in informal employment], and you come back home to find the house in a mess because of your absence’, despaired one participant. Rather than getting into informal employment or pursuing capacity building, they have no choice except to co-opt the gendered template that objectifies them and reduces them to homemakers, although their aid pursuit transforms them into providers.

**Tension between traditional model of married women and refugee model rewarding widowhood**

The proclivity of the humanitarian field to choose widowed and divorced mothers as the preferred target of aid impacts decisions about relationships that refugee women choose for themselves. Recognising the antipathy towards men in the humanitarian field, married refugee women discussed how their marital status made them the least acceptable candidates for aid relief, leaving most refugee women in stable marriages excluded from the humanitarian field. One of the participants complained, ‘It tires me, going and talking about my situation. Having them visit me to see my children. Ultimately, they will see my husband and not assist us’. Meanwhile, widowed or divorced mothers find themselves calculating the benefits of remarrying and having a partner versus remaining single and maintaining access to aid despite the stigmatisation surrounding unattached women.

The traditional model of marriage that refugee women aspire towards is challenged because it denies their deservingness of aid and precipitates marital tensions as husbands and wives cope with the changes in gender dynamics. Although this might produce an environment for gender-based violence (Freedman 2017), our data suggest that refugee husbands and wives experience estrangement as patriarchal power relations are reformulated and relocated from the domicile to the aid field because the men are incapacitated due to the deprivation of the physical, social and economic sources of their power. Thus, while the prevalence of gender-based violence against Syrian women (Hassan and Cankurtaran 2022) and the lack of legal recourse available for them in Turkey (Kivilcim 2016) create cause for concern, we need to look beyond the refugee house to locate the site of violence.

The refugee model rewarding widowhood provides a privileged position. However, it poses a significant threat of violence, as widowed refugee women have to contend with stigmatisation: sexualised as unattached objects of desire for Syrian and Turkish men who imagine themselves as saviours and viewed as threats to other women’s marital prospects. Illustrating this, a participant who separated from an abusive husband allowed him back because she was concerned about gossip and sexual encroachment. In another instance, a widowed participant who already had a harassment case lodged complained of being victim-blamed for the harassment because she refused re-marriage, exemplifying the no-win situation refugee women face.

**Tension between gaining authority and maintaining an image of vulnerability in public**

The imposed image of vulnerability for refugee women in public often contradicts their position of authority within their families as they become heads of households. Taking
the inevitable lead in pursuing aid, refugee women also assume authority as their roles shift to accommodate the change in their duties towards their families. One participant discussed her newfound authority since becoming the household head. ‘I am making the decisions; going out for groceries, managing the Kızılay kart’, she said. Such newfound influence allowed her the authority to forbid her son from marrying, although he was of marriable age, a bold decision made to ensure her son’s salary could service her family. It also allowed her to influence her husband to take the treacherous road across the Turkish border into Greece in the summer of 2021: ‘I told my husband that we fled to Turkey from Syria because he said so. Now he should find a way for us to flee to Europe because I say so’, she stated. She felt she could not have pursued these authoritative decisions had she been back in Syria.

However, not all refugee women sit as comfortably in their new seats of power as family matriarchs. Other women discussed the mental exhaustion they felt in navigating the humanitarian field, where they always have to portray a certain level of vulnerability to retain their eligibility. ‘I cannot be in a better position than this. I have to thank God for what little I have and be cautious not to get more than that’, a woman expressed. This was underlined during an interview which was paused to accommodate a private donor who was visiting families they might assist. After having entertained the donor, we resumed our interview. However, it was evident that the participant was burdened by the ‘donor’s gaze’, returning again and again to the question of how her home might have been perceived, whether its cleanliness and order, whether the mix of second-hand sofas or having a TV might have impacted the judgement about her vulnerability. She was also careful to hide our presence in her home, concealing her active interactions with other parties interested in refugee affairs. Thus, refugee women have to temper their authority with vulnerability since they are always in danger of being excluded.

Conclusion

With a case study in Ankara, this article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the collective and individual agency of refugee women under the conditions of dependency on humanitarian aid embodies paradoxes that are hard to reconcile. We do so by exploring the strategies of Syrian refugee women as they respond to the gendered templates of ‘deserving’ refugees in the humanitarian field, which interacts with representations of refugees in the Turkish context. We illustrated that the constructions of women as homemakers and caregivers in the family and refugees represented predominantly as victimised women transform the humanitarian field into a feminised space. The rationalisation of gendered humanitarian interactions and the entrenchment of widowed refugee mothers as the preferred category of refugees in the Turkish context prompt refugee men to withdraw from the humanitarian field. We argued that, as Syrian refugee women are responsibilised for aid, they are trapped between the ‘deserving refugee’ tropes embedded in distinct ways in local aid practices and gendered constructions which cast them as sexualised threats to the Turkish family, producing stigmatisation.

In drawing attention to how strategies unfold in practice, we discussed how the refugee women in our study pursued aid: by colluding with each other to maintain their pristine image to prevent ostracisation from their community and to counteract their constructions as threats to the moral fabric of Turkish society, paradoxically by
deploying strategies to discreetly find favour with aid workers through the usage of their femininity and finally by rendering the men in their lives invisible as they recognise the power of their image as single, vulnerable, and in need of protection.

In an environment where job opportunities are severely curtailed and cash transfer programmes are not universal, refugee women are transformed into the sole providers of their families through their engagement in the humanitarian field. Tensions emerge due to the constructions of refugees in Turkish society as lazy and unwilling to work, producing animosity among aid workers and prompting articulated expectations that refugees should seek jobs. This pushes refugee women to oscillate between aid and employment as they respond to conflicting messages from the humanitarian field that they are deserving of aid but should also be self-sufficient. Another tension emerges between the traditional aspiration to be a wife and mother and the enforced aspiration to be a widowed mother. Widowed refugee mothers are simultaneously framed as the most deserving group for aid yet are also denoted a sexualised threat due to their unattached status and presumed desirability in the eyes of men. This produces gendered stigmatisation that can culminate in gender-based violence against them from the Syrian and Turkish communities. A final tension emerges when women have to maintain their image of permanent vulnerability, creating anxieties for those who attain marginal improvements as they risk losing such gains.

Refugee women’s agency is thus fraught with apprehensions as they navigate around the paradoxes produced due to their contradictory constructions. This article points to the need for academics and humanitarian practitioners to take stock of how refugee women’s agency is often deployed within, around and at times in opposition to the constraints of gender norms embedded into humanitarian assistance. Further studies could critically consider how refugee women counter gendered humanitarian enactments in different contexts and locations and explore their fraught agency.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. By 2020, only 62,369 work permit applications were granted to Syrian workers (Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2020).
3. As of August 2022, it provides 230 TL per person under temporary protection in a household.
4. Although the focus of the field study was refugee women, during data collection, a refugee man spontaneously invited himself into the research, adding significant depth to the insight provided by women.
5. The data were collected for a Ph.D. thesis (Zadhy 2022).
6. Widowed or divorced women with no children return to their parent’s household.
7. See Alpak et al. (2015).
8. Syrian women comprise the largest group of foreign brides, with 14.8% (Turkish Statistical Institute 2021). However, this figure does not account for the number of clandestine religious marriages between Turkish men and Syrian women, a practice significantly contributing to their vulnerability and marginalisation.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is unavailable.

Ethics approval

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